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ABSTRACT

The organizational characteristics of public schools, the impact of context on people in schools, and the consequences for school reform are examined. Based on the thesis that organizational characteristics of schools constrain most reform efforts, a suggestion is made for restructuring the teaching day, which promotes effective planning and provides a varied learning experience for students. A recommendation is made for consideration of school organizational context to understand the microsociological and micropolitical ramifications of reform. (LMI)

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SCHOOL REFORM AND SCHOOLS AS ORGANIZATIONS

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SCHOOL REFORM AND SCHOOLS AS ORGANIZATIONS

Most proposals for school reform pay little or no attention to research and theory on school organizations. Given to making startling, media-seeking reports on the state of education, endless commissions and other reform groups have so far, to put it generously, had negligible effects on what goes on in schools.

Missing from their pronouncements are connections to what schools are like as concrete social organizations and to the everyday work lives of the people within those organizations. An understanding of schools in terms of their social and organizational contexts can shed considerable light on the problems of reform: It can help to explain why so many changes in education end up as passing fads that at best gain ritualistic acceptance in some quarters before fading into oblivion and it can suggest conditions under which reforms would be more likely to take hold.

Schools as Social Organizations

The study of schools as social organizations has been a longstanding effort that goes back at least as far as Willard Waller's now classic treatise of nearly 60 years ago, The Sociology of Teaching.[1] Based on the work of numerous scholars, a reasonably coherent picture can be sketched of the more common features of school life.[2] I will very briefly present such a picture, largely in terms of organizational characteristics of public schools, show the impact of context on people in schools, and discuss the overall consequences for school reform.

The more obvious physical arrangements within the typical American school make a good beginning: the classroom system with one teacher and many pupils and the high population and activity densities in classrooms and schools--a lot of people in relatively small spaces engaged in a variety of different activities. Further, classrooms

are ordinarily isolated from one another and are not readily observable, in contrast with such high visibility sites as the corridors, the cafeteria, and the assembly.

Each classroom is the province of a single college trained and state certified teacher, but teaching lacks a recognized set of work procedures and there is a wide array of accepted but not easily measured curricular objectives that range from subject matter attainment through critical thinking to social skills. Not surprisingly, teachers normally enjoy considerable latitude in their work. The students, whose attendance is mandatory, may or may not desire the organization's services. They have their own interests, often lodged in the peer group, and motivating them to learn what the school deems appropriate is considered to be one of the many problems of teaching.

From a political perspective, public schools are vulnerable to interventions from individuals and groups with special concerns. The school's official governing body, the board of education, is usually elected and is subject to pressures from numerous interests, something that, of course, is quite legitimate in a democratic society. Those close to the school such as parents' organizations and the teachers' union are often among the players. Some groups attend primarily to single issues like taxes or drunk driving, but others have more general aims in line with the improvement of education.

The organizational characteristics that I described affect the attitudes and behavior of groups and individuals within the school. These groups, of which the teachers and the students are the largest, display varying degrees of social cohesion which take the form of shared meanings, embodied especially in norms and their underlying values.

For teachers, two of the most salient types of norms center on pupil control and teacher autonomy. The first stem from the mandated nature of the school experience for students and the large and concentrated student population, and the second from the extensive preparation of teachers and the demarcation of classrooms into individual teacher domains. Respective examples of norms are those that enjoin teachers to be

friendly with students, but not too friendly and not until the kids know who's boss, norms proscribing criticism of a colleague in front of students, and norms against interfering in another teacher's class.

A third area of great importance for teachers is time. Time is a prized commodity because of the overload engendered by the large numbers of students and activities teachers are involved with during the typical workday. Overload also threatens autonomy in the sense that time available for preferred activities is limited. This overload and the sometimes oppositional stance of students are both reflected in teachers' use of the language of survival--making it through another day, week or school year.

The students' norms and values ordinarily are quite different from those of the school's adults. The anti-stool pigeon norm that emerges around grade four marks the beginning of genuine student groups. In the earliest grades, students often complain to the teacher about the transgressions of their classmates; within a few years a protective solidarity begins to take hold. Although students vary greatly in their attitudes about schooling (e.g., bookworms vs. dropouts), their school lives commonly revolve around such nonacademic pursuits as friends, romance, and athletics and, influenced by mass media but especially television, clothing, hair styles, music, and a special argot.

School administrators usually function as organizational protectors. Given the political vulnerability of the school, they commonly attempt to anticipate and head off problems before they become crises. They are sensitive to community values and viewpoints, many of which they share. As is the case with teachers, their days consist of fast paced, short, fragmented, often interrupted interactions and activities. Priority goes to problems that require immediate attention or can be quickly resolved. Given the lack of a clear and agreed upon set of work procedures in teaching and their awareness of teachers' desires for autonomy, administrators typically supervise teachers with a light

touch, except when the behavior of teachers (or others) threatens basic organizational goals or relationships.

While I have tried to show lines of connection between organizational characteristics of schools and the behavior and beliefs of participants, reality is, of course, more varied, more situationally contingent, more complex, and more multicausal than my analysis suggests. However, in terms of their consequences, many of the schools' organizational characteristics are mutually reinforcing. Take, for instance, the routinization that is so distinctive of student life in schools and that runs the gamut from hall passes to corridor traffic patterns to instructional arrangements like homogeneous grouping. Such routinization can be traced to the mutually mandated relationship of schools and students, the one to many teaching pattern, the schools' high population and activity densities, and the political vulnerability of the school, along with its highly trained teaching staff, the last two of which encourage an emphasis on order and discipline in line respectively with perceived community values and teacher interests. Consequences such as routinization, that result from several reinforcing organizational characteristics become so ingrained in school life that they can themselves be thought of as organizational characteristics.

Public schools are genuinely complex organizations, in effect, kaleidoscopic organizations, and many of their more common arrangements and practices can be understood in the light of contributions made to the delimitation of chaos and the enhancement of predictability. Routines, rules, and the batch processing of students all make teaching more manageable. This suggests, for instance, why so many teachers resist doing away with homogeneous grouping even though numerous studies have underscored its negative effects on students, and why individualized instruction, an ideal subscribed to by most educators for generations, continues to be mainly a slogan and a hope.

Interestingly, while schools themselves are full of action and the potential for turmoil, they are, because of that, reasonably predictable from an organization theory perspective. Thus, even in the absence of concrete information about schools, it would be expected, for example, that organizations serving clients having no choice about their participation would have client control problems, that organizations with highly trained personnel working in isolation from one another would have workers who strongly valued their autonomy, and that public organizations in democratic countries would be responsive to key community values.

This analysis locates substantial causation in organizational arrangements or structures to use the sociological term. It dismisses as superficial, arguments that depict school administrators as arch conservatives and teachers as authoritarian personalities, both ready to stunt student creativity and resist the proposals of intruding reformers. Individuals in schools are like individuals everywhere: unique, special and diverse. However, context and the social construction of reality affect the attitudes and values of individuals. Thus, it is not surprising that norms in the teacher and student groups protect their respective members or that teachers value time highly. The organizational and broader social settings influence current circumstances and what is likely to change, which brings us to the issue of reform.

School Reform

Historically, changes in schooling in America have more or less followed societal changes. Deliberate efforts to initiate particular reforms usually have led to few or transitory adoptions. Reforms that institutionalize substantial improvements in the schools' main work, teaching, appear to be rare, but that is just what would be expected from an organization theory standpoint.

My thesis is straightforward: Organizational characteristics of schools stack the deck against most reforms. Reforms typically place extra, sometimes extensive,

demands on teachers' time, both in planning and implementation, and they frequently reduce teacher autonomy since new programs or procedures often limit and channel teachers' classroom options. Reforms also commonly disturb established routines and sometimes reduce status differences between teachers and students, both of which can be perceived as eroding pupil control. Thus, reforms are likely to be at odds with teacher values and norms that favor autonomy, order, and time, which in turn stem from and are reinforced by the schools' structural features.

The schools' political vulnerability often serves as an additional brake on change. School boards and administrators commonly will be wary of reforms that might generate opposition or conflict with community groups. Such groups need not be large ones that reflect majority opinion; they could be small but by looming large to school officials achieve large effects, perhaps heading off even the proposal of change. By the same token schools will respond to clear cut, widespread demands for change from the community, but these demands ordinarily do not require significant internal rearrangements and the general outlook of school administrators remains one of caution with the welfare of their organizations a paramount consideration.

Our analysis indicates why reforms founder, and it can be used to explore possible consequences of current reform efforts. Among the most popular are those discussed under the often ill-defined rubics of restructuring and empowerment. Both of these concepts tend to be applied mainly at the school unit or building level.

Restructuring usually refers to a revamping of the school's decision processes: Authority in certain specified matters is typically vested in a group or council composed of teachers and the principal, often parents, sometimes other community representatives, and rarely, students. Empowerment seems most often to refer to the new power teachers would have as a result of the authority of school councils, although it sometimes refers to the general diffusion of power to all those involved in the decisionmaking process.

Our analysis predicts a few of the problems that could arise. Time will be a major problem for teachers with school-wide decision responsibilities. For decisions to be made proficiently, not to mention wisely, much preparation and effort are required. Alternatives and their likely consequences need to be examined, competing interests and values must be explored and weighed, a decision has to be hammered out, communicated to various parties, implemented, and assessed. A potential dilemma begins to be seen: Empowerment will make administrators of some teachers. To do the job well, they will have to teach less and administer more. And they will fall heir to some of the more common peculiarities of administration such as the advances of people with panaceas, pet projects, or axes to grind, having to sell unpopular decisions, and taking the blame when things go wrong as they inevitably do.

A different kind of problem arises in connection with the teacher autonomy norm. Teachers don't like to be put in the position of telling other teachers what to do, nor do they approve of differentiation within their ranks. Thus, teacher representatives could face conflicting expectations especially when their decisions impacted on instructional content or procedures. Paradoxically, empowerment would probably mean less control for many teachers over their daily in-class activities, since administrators currently supervise instruction very selectively and very lightly, but a school council could legitimate more extensive (and more intrusive) supervision from various sources.

Reform Redux

Without pursuing this example further and recognizing that context commonly has negative effects on change in education, it is time to examine the other (more optimistic) side of the picture, that is, how awareness of organizational context can aid reform.

First, a caveat: There are no panaceas or quick fixes. Educational change is complicated, contingent, and chancy. It's just that when it is informed by knowledge

about school organizations, some of the more basic pitfalls can be avoided. Reforms will be a little less likely to fail in their execution and less likely to atrophy in the familiar but barren climate of lip service and ritualistic adoption. And, reforms that take social and organizational characteristics into account will probably have a reasonably good fit with the everyday needs and preferences of those who are actually working with the reform.

To illustrate how such reforms might be carried out, a single change will be explored: the restructuring of the teaching day. A reform of this kind is what I have elsewhere called a generative innovation, that is, an innovation that can spawn and legitimate other changes.[3] In addition, I am engaged with colleagues in the public schools and the University in planning for just such a reform, in this case, in an elementary school.

Restructuring the teaching day is a fundamental reform in that it changes conditions at the point of delivery of the school's most essential service, learning. It also makes a direct assault on one of the foremost problems associated with change in schools, namely, the demands made on the time of already overloaded teachers. Indeed, one of the purposes of this reform is to make time for individual and peer planning a part of teachers' daily routine. Given the variety of students and subject matter that is each teacher's responsibility, planning time appears to be of critical importance. That it so often takes place on the run or at home after school makes its regular provision an incentive for teachers.

Planning time can be incorporated into the teaching day by using currently available technology and other arrangements that are well known, if not standard practice. Examples of the former are computer assisted instruction of various kinds and video and film presentations; examples of the latter are peer tutoring, cooperative learning, and the use of community volunteers, especially senior citizens, as resource persons. The appropriate student unit would range from the individual through

classroom size aggregates to large groups. The particulars should be worked out by the teachers with the advice and consent of other relevant persons and groups. In line with our analysis, teachers would have to be given time to participate in the development of activities and schedules or perhaps receive extra pay for after school or summer work on the project, if that is their preference.

The importance of teacher autonomy is recognized by giving this responsibility to teachers. However, in the end, this represents a trade-off: Even though the teachers make a large contribution to decisionmaking, a restructured day will require all sorts of coordination and cooperative activity, leaving less room for teachers to operate independently. At the same time, the regular peer planning that this reform will engender should help to institutionalize cooperation among teachers on instructional matters. From an organizational standpoint this is desirable since peer pressures are likely to be a stronger motivator to improve teaching than many others, for instance, the frequently ritualistic one-on-one supervisory observation.

In addition to its potential for the provision of planning time for teachers, an important consideration in view of the present dismal situation, and the possibility that peer planning will generate social support for instructional improvement, a revamped teaching day is even more basically an opportunity to serve students better. Of particular note are the possibilities for devising a more varied, more exciting day for students that would reduce the boring sameness and artificiality of classroom instruction so often deplored by writers on schooling.

Such changes clearly carry with them a threat to the order and control around which so many teacher norms cluster. Since teachers will be instrumental in the design of the new day, they presumably will avoid major problems along these lines. And this is what awareness of organizational context often boils down to--the avoidance or softening of those minor features of a reform that could divert attention from primary aims to unintended consequences. For instance, the redesign of the teaching day will

result in more student movement around the building than is typical in elementary schools. If this led to a significant increase in discipline incidents we would have an example of an unintended negative consequence that could threaten the reform itself. This is the kind of mundane, everyday problem that savvy teachers and school administrators would be alert to and head off, but which higher level policymakers rarely take into account.

When such unintended consequences are reduced and when context is a factor in planning, the higher purposes of reform will get a better hearing and the reservoirs of altruism that can be found in most teachers will be more readily tapped. After all, people usually feel enriched when they are part of something larger that is geared to desirable social aims. Put differently, appeals to higher purposes are likely to be more effective when their implementation does not entail what working educators see as obvious impracticalities that negate benefits and call into question the reform that was intended to achieve those purposes.

Patently, the connections between purposes, the reform, and the procedures of implementation need to be clear. In the case of the restructured teaching day, the major aims are to institutionalize more effective teacher planning and a more varied, more lively educational experience for students. These aims and their congruence with the schedules, modes of delivery, and other specifics that are developed will have to make sense to those internal to the school, but also to others, especially the school's political constituency.

Parents and the community in general have got to be consulted and involved. Reforms opposed by significant segments of the community are likely to have short and rocky lives; those blessed with the leverage provided by community support have a better chance. In any event, public organizations have a responsibility to their constituents. And, as most school administrators are well aware, community involvement usually both protects and benefits their organizations. Communication and

participation furnish opportunities for individuals and groups to express their views, but also educate and reduce misunderstanding. After all, it doesn't take much imagination to hear the revised teaching day denounced as paying teachers for teaching less or as an unnecessary experiment that will disrupt and weaken student learning.

Concluding Comments

My purpose has been to shed light on the problem of educational reform by looking at everyday life in schools as it has been portrayed in theory and research. What was presented was, of course, my version of how such inquiries contribute to a conception of school organizations that, in turn, is relevant to reform.

A major problem has been that the often simplistic recommendations for change coming from a variety of sources have been decoupled from implementation, as is common in the broader political arena. Aspects of the school setting that are likely to affect the fate of reforms are typically ignored or neglected.

Taking into account the organizational context of schools provides an opportunity to consider the micro-sociological and micro-political ramifications of reform. However, as my treatment of a specific change, the restructured teaching day, suggests, there are no sure things, even when reform is informed by knowledge of context. Visions of what ought to be in education, if they are to have more than rhetorical meaning, must be tied to concrete courses of action in concrete settings. Such work is risky and always unfinished, but it is perhaps a little less risky when relevant theories are reflexively brought into play.

NOTES

[1]Willard Waller, The Sociology of Teaching. New York: Wiley, 1932.

[2]See, for instance, Norman J. Boyan (Ed.), Handbook of Research on Educational Administration. New York: Longman, 1988; and Dan C. Lortie, School Teacher. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975. The perspective presented draws especially from my "Social Control in Schools," in Lee C. Deighton (Ed.), Encyclopedia of Education, Vol. 8, pp. 245-253. New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1971; "School Organizations: Perspectives in Juxtaposition," Educational Administration Quarterly, 28, Summer 1982, pp. 89-110; and "Micropolitics and the Sociology of School Organizations," Education and Urban Society, in press.

[3]Donald J. Willower, "Educational Change and Functional Equivalents," Education and Urban Society, 2, August 1970, pp. 385-402.